CHAPTER VII

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The main aim of the present investigation was to study life satisfaction of the elderly in relation to perceived stress, happiness, optimism, humor and resilience. The level of satisfaction among the aged affects not only their psychological adjustment but also their physical, emotional and social well-being. Moreover, life satisfaction is a concept that is assumed to reflect the conditions of ‘a good life’. Therefore, it was considered worthwhile to investigate the role of happiness, optimism, humor and resilience towards life satisfaction of the elderly, apart from studying the stress – life satisfaction linkage.

The review of literature reveals that perceived stress reduces the degree of life satisfaction among elderly people, while positive affect increase life satisfaction of the elderly. It was therefore, postulated that positive affect would reduce the negative impact of perceived stress in the elderly and also help them to encounter life’s challenges, thereby, leading to greater life satisfaction. The review of literature also reveals that life satisfaction has been studied in different stages of life, but the concern for elderly people is utmost important because they have faced a number of events during their course of life.
The following **objectives** were framed for the present study:

1. To examine the contribution of perceived stress, happiness, optimism, humor and resilience towards life satisfaction of elderly males and females.
2. To examine the relationship of life satisfaction with perceived stress, happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.
3. To examine the relationship of perceived stress with happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.
4. To examine inter-relations among happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.
5. To examine gender differences in life satisfaction, perceived stress, happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.

The following **hypotheses** were formulated in the present investigation:

1. Life satisfaction would be negatively related with perceived stress.
2. Life satisfaction would be positively related with happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.
3. Perceived stress would be negatively related with happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.
4. Happiness would be positively related with optimism, humor and resilience.
5. Optimism would be positively related with humor and resilience.
6. Humor would be positively related with resilience.
7. There would be no differences between elderly males and females.
on life satisfaction.

8. Elderly women would report more perceived stress than elderly men, while the latter would report higher levels of happiness, optimism, humor and resilience.

The sample comprised 200 elderly males and 200 elderly females from intact families from major cities of Punjab (such as Patiala, Ludhiana, Jallandhar and Amritsar). The age range of the participants was 60 to 65 years. Purposive sampling was done for the present investigation as educated elderly individuals coming from middle to upper middle class families (pre-tested for socio-economic status) were taken in the present investigation. The data of only those elderly were considered who were not having any chronic illness, who were living with their families, and whose spouse was alive and was staying with him/her. Furthermore, data was collected by administering the questionnaires individually to the participants. Inter-correlations were computed, and stepwise regression analyses and t-test were applied.

The **major findings** of the present investigation are as follows:

1. Happiness emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction followed by resilience, attitudes towards humor, appreciation of humor, and optimism among elderly females. Similarly, happiness emerged as the highest predictor of life satisfaction followed by attitudes towards humor, resilience, humor production, optimism and perceived stress among elderly males. So, it can be said that happiness, resilience, some aspects of
humor along with optimism emerged as predictors of life satisfaction in the elderly. These strengths predicted life satisfaction even after controlling for variations in perceived stress.

2. 30 percent of the variance in life satisfaction of elderly women and 46 percent of the variance in life satisfaction of elderly men was being explained by the obtained predictor variables.

3. Life satisfaction was found to be negatively related with perceived stress among elderly males and females, though it did not emerge as a predictor of life satisfaction for elderly females (and was a weak predictor of life satisfaction for elderly males).

4. All positive resources/strengths [viz., happiness, resilience, (some aspects of) humor and optimism] emerged as positive predictors of life satisfaction in elderly males as well as females. It was interesting to find that these positive strengths predicted life satisfaction even after controlling for the variations in stress. Hence, the findings clearly revealed that although life satisfaction is related to perceived stress, positive strengths play the key role in determining life satisfaction of the elderly.

5. Happiness emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction in elderly males and females. It solely contributed 18% of the variance in life satisfaction in females, and 19% of the variance in life satisfaction in elderly males.
6. Resilience emerged as the second strongest predictor of life satisfaction in case of elderly females whereas, it was the third strongest predictor of life satisfaction in elderly males.

7. Humor was found to contribute towards life satisfaction of the elderly by means of healthy attitudes towards humor, which was the third strongest predictor of life satisfaction in case of elderly females and second strongest predictor of life satisfaction in elderly males. Apart from this, appreciation of humor emerged as a predictor of life satisfaction in females whereas, humor production emerged to be so for elderly males. Thus, *humor, in one form or the other, predicted life satisfaction in the elderly*. An interesting finding was that one dimension of humor, viz., humor as a coping mechanism did not emerge as a predictor of life satisfaction in case of elderly males as well as females, although other aspects of humor did emerge as significant predictors in either case.

8. Optimism too, was found to positively predict life satisfaction in elderly males as well as females.

9. Perceived stress was found to be negatively related with happiness, optimism and resilience in elderly males and females (except perceived stress and optimism which were not related in case of elderly females).
10. Perceived stress was found to be negatively related with humor, by and large. It was interesting to find that the links between perceived stress and attitudes towards humor were totally missing.

11. Happiness, optimism and resilience were found to be positively related with each other in case of elderly males as well as females.

12. Happiness, optimism and resilience were found to be positively related with three aspects of humor, viz., humor production, humor as a coping mechanism, and appreciation of humor in elderly males as well as females. But one aspect of humor, viz., attitude towards humor was not related with happiness in case of elderly males as well as females. It was not related with optimism and resilience in elderly males, and in case of elderly females, it was weakly related.

13. Perceived stress was found to be higher in elderly females than elderly males.

14. Elderly males scored higher on happiness, optimism, humor production, humor as a coping mechanism, appreciation of humor, and resilience as compared to elderly females.

15. There were no significant differences between elderly males and females with regard to life satisfaction and attitudes towards humor.
To conclude, it may be said that happiness, resilience, optimism and (some aspects of) humor emerged as strong predictors of life satisfaction in the elderly. These strengths predicted life satisfaction even after controlling for variations in perceived stress. Life satisfaction was found to be negatively related with perceived stress among elderly males and females, though it did not emerge as a predictor of life satisfaction for elderly females (and was a weak predictor of life satisfaction for elderly males).

Although elderly males and females do not seem to differ in their degree of life satisfaction, they may face problems differentially and may also use different resources to achieve life satisfaction. For instance, humor production was found to be deterministic in predicting life satisfaction of elderly males whereas, in case of females, appreciation of humor was found to do so. Moreover, elderly women reported greater perceived stress than elderly men, while the latter reported higher levels of happiness, optimism, resilience, humor production, humor coping and appreciation than the former. There were no gender differences were found with regard to attitudes towards humor.

Thus, the findings reveal that the ability to cultivate positive emotions is an important skill for reducing negative emotions, and building resilience. Fredrickson et al. (2003) too, postulate that positive emotions buffer depression in trait-resilient individuals. It can therefore, be derived that elderly people, who are skilled in positive emotions, bounce back quickly from stress. Positive resources
therefore, play a crucial role in buffering the effects of stress, and help in enhancing life satisfaction in the elderly.

**IMPLICATIONS:**

The thrust of the present research was to reveal the areas in which efforts can be made to improve life satisfaction of the elderly. Life satisfaction depends on the result of the process of adaptation to the changes associated with age and to the challenging situations of life, all of this modulated by a set of life events and personal resources.

Life satisfaction is the sense of happiness, contentment and fulfillment that older people experience when they adapt well to the diverse changes that come with aging. Such changes may include loss of physical function and independence, reduced income due to retirement, and death of relatives and friends.

Knight (1986) pointed out that elderly people, throughout their life span, develop potent and effective ways of coping with adverse situations. Baltes and Baltes (1990) too, found that successful aging explains adaptation by means of the process of selective optimisation with compensation, while Pearlin and Skaff (1995) found the use of appropriate strategies along with social and economic resources, which constitute the key to such adaptation.

While many elderly people adapt successfully to the multiple challenges presented by age, such successful adaptation is not always the case. The consequences of failure to adapt are diverse, and include psychological and behavioural disorders, as well as the worsening of
health, and functional and physical deterioration. Gerontological researchers too, have shown a preference for analyzing the problems derived from poor adaptation in terms of results (low level of satisfaction with life, perceived stress, etc.).

Thus, interventions have been oriented towards preventive and remediative action and promotion of healthy resources/strategies. Preventive intervention strategies should be prioritised, especially if one is concerned with the promotion of successful aging (Gram & Albee, 1995). From the preventive perspective, there are two types of strategies, one focuses on the anticipation of negative consequences that may derive from adverse life situations, and the other aims at promoting strategies to develop competencies, abilities and skills that permit elderly people to cope successfully with future adverse situations. Thus, relevant intervention strategies can be developed from an essentially optimistic perspective on old age.

One of the current thrust areas in gerontology is the focus on positive emotions. There are several major benefits that can accrue from cultivating positive emotions. Positive emotions expand (“broaden”) thought-action alternatives, making people more flexible, creative, open and efficient. Positive emotions can build enduring and valuable personal resources such as resilience, which helps people bounce back from stressful experiences. Positive emotions can help to produce human flourishing and long-term happiness by accumulating and compounding over time, transforming individuals, making them healthier and more socially integrated, knowledgeable, effective, and
resilient. Fredrickson believes that “positive emotions — by broadening people’s mindsets and building their enduring resources — can alleviate human languishing and seed human flourishing.”

The use of positive emotions in daily life focuses on engaging in strategies that increase and enhance positive emotional experiences. A host of studies point to the psychological and physical benefits of increasing or enhancing positive emotional experiences. Benefits accrue from cultivating positive emotions in everyday life (Fredrickson, 2000) as well as in response to negative circumstances. One important strategy is to find positive meaning in negative events, which produces positive emotions that help buffer against stress (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). People find positive meaning in daily life through multiple pathways. These include:

(1) positive reappraisal;

(2) problem-focused coping; and

(3) infusing ordinary events with positive meaning.

So, it can be said that when a negative event occurs, the individual psychologically creates a positive event or reinterprets a commonplace event more positively, as a way of buffering the effects of perceived stress. If the elderly people become aware of their unique strengths, they can take advantage of their strengths to feel satisfied with life. For instance, positive emotions can be a useful response for coping with a negative experience. It may be beneficial in increasing or enhancing positive emotional experiences, which in turn, can be effective for coping with negative life events.
Research in the area of positive psychology indicates that people are happier, more creative, and more productive when utilizing strengths. Positive affective states become the fuel and the raw material for experiencing more growth and development, and successful interactions in the world, and this can be achieved by building and developing strengths. Identifying one’s personal strengths and consciously incorporating them into daily activities tends to bring greater happiness and life satisfaction. So, it can be said that it is important to generate and build the experience of positive affective states rather than simply overlooking negative emotions.

Azeredo (2010) found that formal education, geographical areas, and gender can influence happiness. Health-care providers should provide proper intervention to alleviate mental health problems, especially among elderly women, who report more stress and lower levels of happiness, optimism, humor and resilience as compared to elderly men.

Happiness can elude the elderly, making this all the more important to attain, especially in one's advanced years. Growing old is not that easy. Most of the times, perceived stress affects elderly people, especially because they tend to feel helpless and inactive after retirement, with their role as primary provider being over. But then again, there are the elderly who still walk with a spring in their step, enjoy travelling, engage in sporting activities, and even take on easy jobs. These are the ones who want to live in the present and keep themselves busy despite their golden age. Thus, there is a need for
them to re-frame their social roles and expectations, and re-integrate themselves in the socially stressful world. Seeing the turmoil and stresses in the modern era, it is often questioned as to how one can achieve happiness in the present times. Here, it is important to note that happiness lies within oneself, and one has to search within oneself, and find one’s routes to happiness because it depends upon one’s attitude. Happiness is not one’s sense of experiencing positive emotions at the cost of others. It is experiencing a sense of fulfilment in life by involving oneself in meaningful activities, and in seeking and attaining meaningful goals.

Here, Dalai Lama’s (2009) philosophy comes to one’s mind that happiness is an art. This art of happiness includes:

(a) the purpose of life is happiness;

(b) happiness occurs because of one’s state of mind rather than environmental events;

(c) happiness can be achieved by training, and one can reshape one’s attitudes; and

(d) the key to happiness is in one’s own hands.

Furthermore, in Dalai Lama’s words, all beings are equal in both, their desire for happiness and their right to obtain it. He believes that the purpose of life is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want to suffer. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment. He further states (1998) that “I don't know whether the Universe, with its countless
galaxies, stars, and planets, has a deeper meaning, but at the very least, it is clear that we humans who live on this earth face the task of making a happy contended life for ourselves.” This view is also emphasized by the Indian holy granths such as the Ramayan, the Bhagvad Gita and Shri Guru Granth Sahib.

Thus, it becomes evident that authentic happiness at its peak is associated with moving from cognitive needs and self-actualisation towards aesthetic needs and self-transcendence. It is making one’s life purposeful by keeping oneself on the true and righteous path in life and by engaging oneself in serving others religiously and selflessly.

One can move towards attaining this sense of happiness with conscious and constant self-evaluation, self-criticism, change and self-enhancement. And moving towards this road of happiness, one may change one’s attitude so that the “self” is no longer the central figure of thought, but goes in the background so that one can serve selflessly, dutifully and righteously.

Another resource that can buffer the effects of perceived stress is optimism. According to Churchill (2010), “A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” This quote suggests that optimists and pessimists have fundamentally different ways of interpreting the world. Recent research indicates that optimists and pessimists approach problems differently, and their ability to cope successfully with adversity differs as a result. Martin Seligman defines (1991) optimism as reacting to problems with a sense of confidence and high personal ability. He further states that
optimistic people believe that negative events are temporary, limited in scope and manageable. People can also change their levels of optimism depending on the situations they are in because optimism is a learnable skill. Martin Seligman, father of positive psychology, propounded that the optimistic explanatory style is an important protective factor in dealing with difficult life circumstances.

Evidence suggests that optimism is important in coping with difficult life events. Optimism has been linked to better responses to various difficulties (Brissette et al., 2003). Optimism appears to play a protective role, assisting people in coping with extraordinarily trying incidents. Furthermore, optimism has been found to correlate positively with life satisfaction and self-esteem (Lucas et al., 1996).

Moreover, optimism can have profound effects on a person’s health. The mere act of expecting positive outcomes and being hopeful can boost a person’s immune system, protect against perceived stress, and help people cope with setbacks. This evidence seems to support the idea that optimism can be developed and nurtured in people because it can be trained or learned. Thus, one needs to be change one’s pattern of thought, explanatory styles of behaviour and learn re-attribution training to promote cognitive restructuring and developing a belief of sense of self-control, competence and execution of desired behaviour that anyone can learn to derive the numerous benefits of optimism.

Another intervention that can be proposed is inculcating/propagating a healthy sense of humor to reduce the negative effects of perceived stress. Humor has been found to reflect healthy aging in the
elderly (Shammi & Stuss, 2003). Shammi and Stuss (2003), in a study on elderly persons with frontal lobe degeneration, found that the elderly who were still able to get a punch line at 50 years and greater, were shown to have three important humor faculties that functioned: working memories, mental flexibilities, and verbal abstraction abilities. Thus, humor may not only affect life outcomes directly, but also indirectly by influencing our cognitions and cognitive styles. Humor allows one to shift one’s negative thoughts into positive ones. According to Vaillant (1992), humor allows for the "overt expression of feelings without personal discomfort or immobilization, and without unpleasant effect on others." He further found that mature defenses, including sense of humor, were found to be predictive of greater levels of mental and physical health, life satisfaction, job success, and marital stability.

Tse et al. (2010) examined the effectiveness of a humor therapy program in relieving chronic pain, enhancing happiness and life satisfaction, and reducing loneliness among older persons with chronic pain. It was an 8-week humor therapy program (experimental group), while those in another nursing home were treated as a control group, and were not offered the program. On completion of the humor therapy program, there were significant decreases in pain and perception of loneliness, and significant increases in happiness and life satisfaction for the experimental group, but not for the control group. Thus, the use of humor therapy appears to be an effective non-pharmacological intervention.

Martin et al. (1993) studied the interaction between sense of
humor and measures of stressful life events in predicting levels of mood disturbance, and found that as stressful life events increased, individuals with higher scores on humor measures showed less of an increase in disturbed moods. Martin and Dobbin (1988) extended these findings in an investigation of the effects of life stress on immunity, as measured by levels of immunoglobulin A (IgA), an antibody that is important in the body's defense against upper respiratory infections. Subjects with higher scores on humor revealed less of a tendency for IgA levels to decrease with increased stress. Other researches using these measures have indicated significant relationships between sense of humor and optimism, sense of coherence, and intimacy (Martin, 1996). Thus, adopting and promoting healthy attitudes towards humor can benefit individuals physiologically as well as psychologically.

Proponents of the view that humor is a form of coping are not always clear about whether they view sense of humor as a sort of ability or a habitual behavioural style or trait. If it is conceptualized as an ability or skill, then, this would mean that individuals vary in their capacity to use humor as a coping strategy, and it might lend itself to a performance testing approach to assessment. In contrast, a habitual style or trait view would imply that, although all individuals may have the ability to use humor in coping, they vary in their habitual tendency to do so, and in this case, a trait measurement approach would be more appropriate. Clarification of this issue would be helpful, as it also has implications for the approaches taken in therapeutic efforts to
increase people's sense of humor to help them cope more effectively with stress.

Apart from happiness, optimism and humor, another resource which minimizes the negative effects of perceived stress among elderly people is resilience. Resilience is having the skills or attributes to recover quickly from a mental, physical or emotional crisis. Some individuals seem to have a natural ability to bounce back from adverse circumstances, while others have to learn how to become resilient. Windle et al. (2008) discovered that psychological resilience moderated the negative effect of chronic illness on subjective well-being among the elderly aged above 60. Furthermore, several researchers have shown that resilient elderly people are more likely to experience positive emotions (Block & Block, 1980; Masten, 2001; Ong et al., 2004).

Thus, it is evident that from above that people share the capacity to use positive emotions to cope (Fredrickson, 2000) and to develop resilience (Masten, 2000). Resilient people, however, may tap this skill more readily than others and may be particularly adept at using positive emotions when coping (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). This arsenal of personal resources produced by positive emotions can be drawn on in times of need, which may have important value in the coping process (Fredrickson, 2000).

The American Psychological Association (2006) suggests ten ways to build resilience, which are as follows:

(1) Maintaining good relationships with close family members,
friends and others;

(2) avoid seeing crises or stressful events as unbearable problems;

(3) accepting circumstances that cannot be changed;

(4) developing realistic goals and moving towards them;

(5) taking decisive actions in adverse situations;

(6) looking for opportunities of self-discovery after a struggle with loss;

(7) developing self-confidence;

(8) keeping a long-term perspective and considering the stressful event in a broader context;

(9) maintaining a hopeful outlook, expecting good things and visualizing what is wished;

(10) taking care of one’s mind and body, exercising regularly, paying attention to one’s own needs and feelings, and engaging in relaxing activities that one enjoys.

Using these suggestions for identifying personal strengths and integrating them into life may provide greater life satisfaction. So, it is important to explore the applications of positive psychology in terms of gerontology because the study of positive aspects of aging would not only help in understanding the problems of aging, but also help in overcoming these problems.

In sum, it can be said that positive psychology provides a framework that can enrich the understanding of life satisfaction of elderly people. Interventions that focus on specific strengths (such as resilience, optimism and humor) can promote satisfaction with life and
overall well-being. Measures developed in this line of research can enable practitioners to focus on the resources of elderly people. So, using strengths in a new way may improve satisfaction with life. In addition to this, positive emotions are said to play an important role in this process: positive reappraisal generates experiences of positive emotion even amidst stress. In turn, these positive emotional experiences can provide the needed psychological lift to help elderly people continue and move forward in their lives (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000).

**LIMITATIONS:**

The present study has some limitations, which are given below.

1. The sample comprised elderly individuals who were residing with their families. So, these findings cannot be generalized to other categories of the elderly, such as the institutionalized individuals.

2. Only those participants were considered who were living in intact families. So, the findings cannot be generalized to individuals who had faced separation/death/loss of spouse.

3. Participants were taken from middle to upper middle class families. Therefore, these results cannot be generalized to the elderly belonging to other socio-economic strata of the society.

4. These findings are based on self-report of variables.

5. Only those participants were considered in the present investigation who were not suffering from any chronic illness.
Therefore, these findings cannot be generalized to chronically ill or bed-ridden elderly.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH:**

The following suggestions have been proposed for pursuing further research in this field:

1. A comparative study can be conducted to examine the difference between the degree of life satisfaction of the elderly living in institutions and those residing in their homes.

2. This kind of research can also be done to determine life satisfaction during adolescence, adulthood, and old age to analyze developmental trends.

3. Cross-cultural differences in life satisfaction of the elderly can also be examined.

4. A comparative study can be conducted to examine the differences in life satisfaction of married elderly who have not faced death/loss of spouse versus others who have done so (such as widows/widowers, divorced or those residing separately).

5. A comparative study can also be conducted to examine differences in life satisfaction of the elderly belonging to rural and urban backgrounds.

6. An experimental approach can be adopted to examine the effects of positive emotions on diverse cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes.
7. A qualitative approach can be adopted to study psychological strengths, and significant conclusions can be derived from subjective accounts of meaningful experiences.